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Strength and Prospects of Pol Pot's Democratic Kampuchea Forces

An Intelligence Assessment

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SR 81-10018CX

February 1981

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Strength and Prospects of Pol Pot's Democratic Kampuchea Forces

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An Intelligence Assessment

*Information available as of 1 January 1981
was used in the preparation of this report.
Additional information was obtained, but the
conclusions of the report were not affected.*

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This assessment was prepared by [redacted]
of the Eastern Forces Division of the Office of
Strategic Research. Questions and comments are
welcome and should be addressed to the Chief,
Eastern Forces Division, OSR, telephone [redacted]

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This assessment was coordinated with the National
Intelligence Officer for East Asia, the Office of
Political Analysis, and the Office of Geographic and
Societal Research. [redacted]

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**Strength and Prospects of Pol Pot's
Democratic Kampuchea Forces**

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Key Judgments

We estimate that Pol Pot's Democratic Kampuchea (DK) forces currently consist of 13 "divisions" totaling from 30,000 to 35,000 troops. This is a reduction of at least 25,000 from our estimate of the DK main forces at the time of the Vietnamese invasion in December 1978 but a substantial increase over our estimates of their strength in late 1979, when desertions, 25X1 casualties, malaria, and malnutrition had decimated their ranks. Our evidence for all such estimates is limited.

Recognizing Vietnam's military superiority, the DK forces have chosen to operate as guerrillas in units although they have shown the ability to form into larger groups when operationally necessary. Some guerrillas operate in the Kampuchean interior, but most DK forces are confined to areas along the Thai-Kampuchean border.

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Because the DK upper ranks—both army and party—are dominated by a small clique intensely loyal to Pol Pot, the command and control system is highly effective

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The DK currently have sufficient small arms to conduct effective guerrilla warfare in Kampuchea, but they lack the firepower needed for set-piece battles that might challenge the Vietnamese for territorial control.

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We estimate the manpower base from which the DK might draw replacement combat troops to be between 30,000 and 70,000 men, but because of disease and injury not all of these would be fit for combat. A continuing revulsion against Pol Pot has thwarted the DK leaders' efforts to broaden 25X1 their recruiting base within Kampuchea.

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The DK forces are highly disciplined, well organized, amply supplied, and in relatively good physical condition

They have, however, no prospects of defeating the Vietnamese militarily.

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Strength and Prospects of Pol Pot's Democratic Kampuchea Forces

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For a few months the DK tried to maintain a conventional resistance, despite the overwhelming military superiority of the Vietnamese, but in May 1979 Pol Pot, recognizing the danger and futility of this effort, ordered his troops to resume the guerrilla tactics that had brought their victory over Lon Nol in 1975. By June the DK mainline units had dispersed into battalion-size units, and by August the increasingly hard-pressed troops had begun operating in platoon-size units of 25 to 30 men. Later, the squad (10 to 12 men) became the basic unit of the DK in its current guerrilla organization—although in late 1980 some guerrillas formed into larger groups for operations.

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Current Military Situation

Organization. [redacted] reporting [redacted]

[redacted] indicate that most of the DK resistance forces are currently organized into at least 13 divisions.¹ These divisions appear—in Chinese fashion—to have three regiments of three battalions each, and we assume [redacted]

[redacted] that each battalion is in turn made up of three companies. Manpower levels in all units differ according to the local availability of soldiers. [redacted]

¹ The term division is used in this paper as the DK themselves use it and is not intended to reflect actual capability. The DK regulars are a guerrilla force whose designated divisions have only a fraction of the personnel and equipment usually associated with a conventional division. In addition to those units included in our estimate [redacted] indicates that there are two other DK "divisions" active in Kampuchea—the "1st" (different from 1st unit listed in table 1) and the 9th—but neither of these organizations has a real combat capability. These two divisions possibly have no more than 500 men each and are involved mainly in intelligence operations and propaganda work. [redacted]

DK military organization retains vestiges of the three-tiered structure that shaped the DK forces before the Vietnamese invasion. Between 1975 and 1979 the DK military included: mainline units, constituting a national force with an external defense role; territorial or regional troops, providing security at the district level; and village militia, functioning at the commune and subdistrict levels. The current three-tiered structure consists of the 13 divisions, the transport corps, 25X1 and the village militia, whose primary role is to provide 25X1 security for the transport corps. These distinctions blur 25X1 in many cases, as when village militia units are integrated into new battalions of guerrillas or are pressed 25X1 into service to carry food and ammunition supplies.

The DK leaders seem to be trying to rebuild a force 25X1 that is even more closely related to the preinvasion 25X1 structure. In August 1980 the DK claimed to have 25X1 formed two 800-man mobile strike units, using troops drawn from the 13 divisions. Such strike units would 25X1 constitute a national force, whereas the divisions would assume the role of regional troops. [redacted] 25X1

Strength and Disposition. Although our evidence is limited, we currently estimate that DK regular forces total between 30,000 and 35,000 full-time troops (see table 1) dedicated to guerrilla resistance against the Vietnamese occupiers. This is at least 25,000 less than

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Table 1**Estimated Manpower of DK "Divisions"**

Unit Number	Strength
920th	1,000
801st	1,300
912th	2,000
320th	2,800
519th	2,400
612th	1,800
616th	3,400
415th	4,000
405th	2,000
482nd	3,000
1st [redacted]	
2nd [redacted]	10,000 ^a
3rd [redacted]	
Total	33,700

our estimate of the fighting strength of DK main forces at the time of the Vietnamese invasion in December 1978 but is almost double our estimate of their strength in late 1979, when they were decimated by desertions, casualties, malaria, and malnutrition. [redacted]

The DK also have guerrillas who are active in the Kampuchean interior and seem to be independent of the 13 units listed in table 1. Although the total number of such guerrillas is not known, we do not believe their level of activity warrants an appreciable increase in our estimate of overall DK strength. [redacted]

The majority of the DK forces are in areas along the Thai-Kampuchean border. Neither the 13 divisions, the other DK troops, nor the DK civilians are in what could be considered secure or liberated zones, for there are no sizable areas in Kampuchea that are safe from Vietnamese operations. Nonetheless, the DK have been able to establish bases, grow food, and produce primitive weapons in several areas inside Kampuchea

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within 50 kilometers of the border. Some units have been forced to move by aggressive Vietnamese sweep operations, but others [redacted] have successfully resisted even the most intense Vietnamese pressure. [redacted]

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Arms and Equipment. DK forces currently have sufficient small arms to conduct an effective guerrilla warfare campaign against Vietnamese military forces in Kampuchea almost indefinitely. Since January 1979 China has provided the DK with almost 6,000 tons of military supplies, including small arms, rockets, anti-tank and antipersonnel mines, mortars, and recoilless rifles. Also included have been medicines and surgical equipment, uniforms, radios, and bicycles. The PRC has furnished a considerable amount of munitions, but the DK stocks appear to be too scanty to support operations for more than a few months without resupply. [redacted]

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The DK have such crew-served weapons as 82-mm mortars and 75-mm recoilless rifles, but because they lost most of their heavier weaponry during the initial Vietnamese invasion they lack the firepower needed for set-piece battles that might challenge the Vietnamese for territorial control. [redacted]

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Pol Pot's forces have supplemented their limited-range, small-caliber arms with various forms of primitive weapons and have used tactics designed to heighten their effectiveness. Punji stakes, snares, and booby traps have served as deadly adjuncts to DK mines, ambushes, and mortar attacks. These weapons and tactics have played an important role in reducing Vietnamese morale and willingness to fight. [redacted]

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Logistics Support. The DK—military and civilians alike—currently depend almost completely on external support. Arms and military supplies come from the Chinese, but food—the factor most critical to the survival of the resistance forces—comes primarily from the stocks of the United Nations World Food Program. The DK also grow some foodstuffs—maize,

tubers, and rice—but too little for their needs. Since early 1980 the DK have received a monthly average of some 2,400 tons of rice, 125 tons of fish, 96 tons of oil, and 55 tons of beans. UNICEF and Red Cross representatives provide some of these supplies to DK civilians concentrated near the Thai villages of Ban Thap Phrik, Ban Nong Pru, and Phnom Chat. The [redacted]

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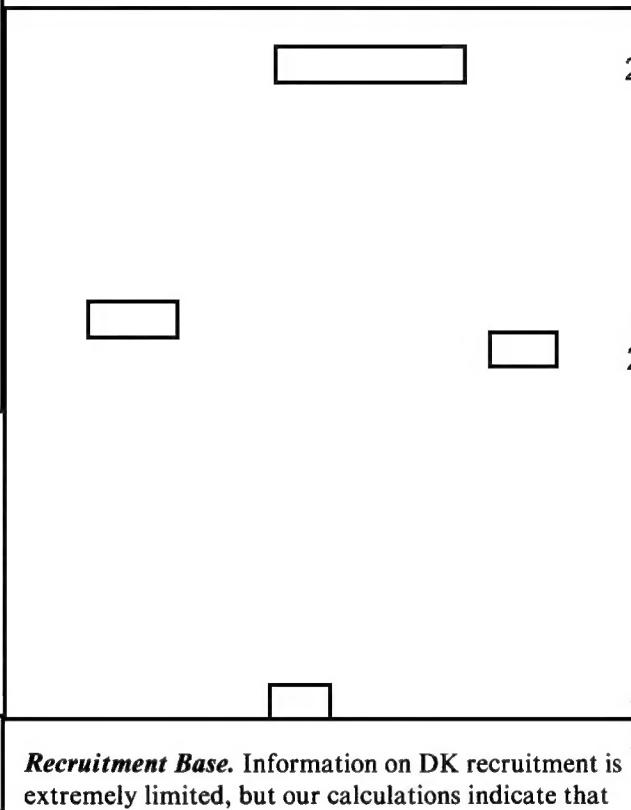
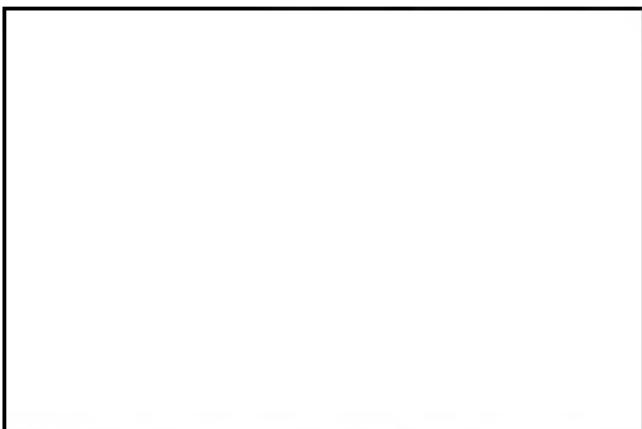
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Command and Control. One of the most impressive features of the DK resistance is the maintenance of an effective command and control system. Even when the DK had serious problems during the initial months of the Vietnamese invasion, their organization retained cohesion.

The DK have been successful at command and control because their upper ranks are dominated by a small clique intensely loyal to Pol Pot. The members of the Standing Committee of the Central Committee of the Kampuchean Communist Party also hold powerful positions in the army (the one exception is Ieng Sary). For example, Pol Pot, who had been premier, still serves as secretary general of the Standing Committee and as commander in chief of the army. Son Sen, Kampuchea's Defense Minister during 1975-79 and still the DK defense minister, concurrently commands the DK Eastern Military Region² and is secretary general of the Supreme Committee of the National Army. Finally, Ta Mok,³ Son Sen's deputy commander, reportedly is the DK chief of the general staff and vice chairman of the Supreme Committee of the National Army.

² The DK have divided their forces in Kampuchea into Eastern and Western Military Regions. The Eastern Military Region consists of all provinces north of the Tonle Sap and Mekong River, with the exception of Battambang Province. The Western Military Region, commanded by Pol Pot, consists of all other provinces.

[]

³ "Ta" is a term of respect meaning "elder."

Recruitment Base. Information on DK recruitment is extremely limited, but our calculations indicate that the manpower base from which the DK could reasonably expect to draw replacement combat troops numbers between 30,000 and 70,000. We developed this range by applying likely high and low attrition rates against those Khmer who probably have remained loyal to the Pol Pot regime since the Vietnamese invasion (see table 2, pages 8 and 9).

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Over the long term, continuing attrition is certain to strain the DK recruitment base. We lack the information to calculate DK losses accurately, but in November 1980 Ieng Sary revealed that the forces were losing 50 men per day. Ieng Sary did not indicate for what length of time the DK had been sustaining these losses, nor did he differentiate between killed and wounded or between combat casualties and losses to disease. If the DK had lost 50 men per day over the whole 20-week wet season in 1980, the ranks would have been depleted by about 7,000 fighters. The DK were avoiding direct combat during that period, and we therefore judge that most of the losses to which Ieng Sary admitted probably represent the sick and wounded, rather than killed. Increased combat would raise the number of

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DK casualties and deplete DK fighting strength more seriously.

It is also important to note that some of the men in our statistically derived manpower base of 30,000 to 70,000 would be incapable of playing a combat role in the DK. The serious consequences of malnutrition throughout most of 1979, combined with the resurgence of infectious diseases—specifically malaria, dysentery, and respiratory tuberculosis—have reduced the number of physically fit Khmer males available for combat. In addition, the lack of a medical support structure for the DK units would prevent many injured men from returning quickly to duty.

Women theoretically could play an important role in sustaining the DK resistance. As shown in table 2, the number of potential combatants for the DK would more than double if the DK were to mobilize women. Khmer women, moreover, have a strong fighting spirit—

A formal combat role for women is unlikely, however. Only a small number of women have heretofore served as combatants, and most have fulfilled more traditional roles—helping the resistance by transporting food and ammunition and cultivating crops to supplement rice supplies.

The DK probably will have little success in recruiting non-Communist Khmer. Some Kampucheaans who had not been associated with the DK might have come under DK control while fleeing before advancing Vietnamese forces, but their numbers are probably not significant. We also believe that, with the horrors of the Pol Pot regime still fresh in the minds of those who suffered under it, few of the surviving Khmer would be attracted to the DK. The DK's limited recruiting success has generally occurred in Khmer Rouge concentrations.

Recognizing that their appeal was limited, the DK have taken several cosmetic measures to improve their image and broaden their base of support. In December 1979 they unveiled a "Patriotic and Democratic Front of the Great National Union of Kampuchea," which sought to unite all anti-Vietnamese Khmer behind a banner of Khmer nationalism. That same month, Khieu Samphan, the Khmer Rouge ideologue, as-

sumed the role of DK premier in place of party strongman Pol Pot—whose very name inspires hatred and revulsion in the general Khmer populace. (The DK have been trying especially hard to forge military ties with Son Sann's anti-Communist Khmer Serai resistance forces.) 25X1

More recently, Khieu Samphan and other DK leaders have embarked on a pointed, though still largely unsuccessful, public relations campaign to refurbish the DK image. They now disavow Communism in their efforts to unite Kampucheaans in an anti-Vietnamese crusade. They also claim that the mass killings of 1975-79 were actually the work of Hanoi's agents and, although admitting that they made some errors before being ousted, they contend that these were simply the result of inexperience and will not be repeated. Although the DK further claim that they have no intention of bringing back the same regime that had been in power, Pol Pot's power is undiminished. Consequently, the DK are not achieving the wide popular support for which they had hoped, either in Kampuchea or abroad. 25 25 25X125

Strategy and Tactics. The statements of Pol Pot and other DK leaders make it clear that they model their actions on the blueprint for protracted war found in the writings of Mao Zedong. To Mao there were three stages in a successful resistance against an invading force: a period of strategic offense and defense, a period of strategic stalemate, and a counteroffensive. The DK have adapted this framework to their own long-term struggle against the Vietnamese and posit the following three stages:

- Deep Vietnamese invasion that necessitates DK defensive rear-guard actions supplemented by guerrilla warfare and static defense. 25X1
- A Vietnamese defensive posture in the cities and along main lines of communication after the terminal points in the offensive have been reached. The DK engage Vietnamese troops along the farthest points of the Vietnamese advance but switch a major part of their force to the enemy's rear, where they base themselves in areas not occupied by the enemy and wage extensive guerrilla warfare.

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Table 2**Estimated Recruiting Base for the DK Mainline Forces^a**

Date	Event and Estimated Demographic Impact	Estimated Attrition (Percent)		Provincial Troops	
		Low	High	Low	High
December 1978	Eve of Vietnamese invasion			7,200 ^b	10,800 ^b
January-June 1979	Vietnamese defeated DK and occupied main towns and lines of communication in Kampuchea. DK-controlled areas experienced general deprivation and strict controls. Physical security for civilians was poor as opposing forces skirmished. Food shortages began.	10 ^f	15 ^f	6,120	9,720
July-December 1979	DK resumed fighting. Meager harvest led to widespread famine. Malaria, dysentery, and respiratory tuberculosis became epidemic.	4 ^g	8 ^g	5,630	9,330
January-November 1980	International relief effort (begun in October 1979) helped to alleviate conditions. DK avoided confrontation with Vietnamese to preserve forces. Attrition due to disease and combat began to decline.	2 ^h	4 ^h	5,410	9,140

^a Most numbers are rounded to three significant figures. The individuals may be in Kampuchea or in Thailand.

^b In 1978 each of the approximately 120 districts in Kampuchea had one militia company of 60 to 90 men. The 7,200 and 10,800 figures are the result of simple multiplication.

^c By 1978 each commune and subdistrict had one or two 12-man organized DK units. We postulate there were between 1,000 and 2,000 communes in Kampuchea at that time.

^d For control and administration, the DK relied on five-man committees, plus their staffs, at the region and sector levels and three- to five-man committees at the district and commune levels. We estimate that DK cadre members nationwide numbered at least 5,000 in December 1978.

^e We have calculated the families of provincial troops, guerrillas, and cadre members by using a factor of four, representing a wife and three children. We have not calculated family members for the DK mainline troops; most of them were in their teens or early twenties, and therefore very few were heads of households.

^f The 10- and 15-percent attrition rates represent our best estimate of DK losses for the period.

^g The 4-percent attrition rate was used in a recent CIA research paper [redacted]

[redacted] in estimating the current Kampuchean population. The 8-percent rate is based on our judgment that the DK

- A counteroffensive, the success of which depends on the accumulated strength of the DK, on international support, and on changes within Vietnam that would reduce the Vietnamese war-waging capability. [redacted]

According to Mao, a change in the relative strength of the belligerents should occur during each of the above stages. Thus, the DK see the Vietnamese as initially strong but becoming weakened by casualties, material attrition, deteriorating troop morale, economic strains and discontent at home, and continued world condemnation. The DK see themselves overmatched at first, but gaining strength as they mobilize the Khmer people, score successes in guerrilla warfare, and acquire increased international support. [redacted]

Much of the DK strategy—adopting united-front tactics, avoiding major confrontation with the Vietnamese, and striving for international backing to retain their United Nations seat—has been designed to bring about this change in strength. Its flaws lie in the antipathy of the Khmer people to the DK movement and in the fact that, despite the effect of the predicted strains of war and occupation, the Vietnamese show no signs of weakening in their resolve to maintain their hold on Kampuchea. [redacted]

Tactically, the DK continue to wage a classic guerrilla war, employing what they call their “three basic combat tactics”:

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Guerrillas		Cadre		Family Members		Total	
Low	High	Low	High	Low	High	Low	High
25,000 ^c	5,000 ^d	148,000 ^e	163,200 ^e	185,200	188,000		
21,300	22,500	4,250	4,500	126,000	147,000	157,000	184,000
19,600	21,600	3,910	4,320	116,000	141,000	145,000	176,000
18,800	21,168	3,750	4,320	111,000	138,000	139,000 28,000	173,000 35,000
						111,000 83,400 ^j	Total population under DK control Less children under age of 10 ⁱ
						69,000 ^k	Less women
						27,800	Net recruitment base for the DK

military and civilians and other DK-controlled Khmer probably lived under much harsher conditions than the bulk of the Khmer population.

^b These attrition rates have been devised to reflect continued DK casualties and losses from disease, especially malaria.

ⁱ We estimate that children constitute approximately 20 percent of the total population under DK control.

^j Field reporting suggests that women constitute as much as 75 percent of the current adult Kampuchean population. We have used this factor in deriving the 83,400 figure.

^k This figure is based on the possibility that women make up only about 50 percent of the surviving recruitment base population.

This percentage is not likely to apply throughout the DK structure, but it does represent the possible high side of a range.

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- To interdict communication and transportation lines.
- To expand the production and use of all types of primitive weapons.
- To stage guerrilla raids that result in continuing Vietnamese casualties.

Prospects

At present, the DK—military and civilians—remain a sizable, highly disciplined organization that, if provided with continued military assistance from the Chinese [redacted] can continue to oppose the Vietnamese in Kampuchea. Pol Pot and his troops have no prospect, however, for defeating the Vietnamese militarily. Moreover, over the long term, unless the DK can expand their recruitment base, they will face a growing problem of maintaining their military strength as attrition from combat casualties and disease erodes their numbers.

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By these means the DK hoped to inflict some 50,000 casualties on the Vietnamese during the 1980 rainy season. Although information on Vietnamese battle casualties is sparse, it is clear that the DK failed to inflict such high losses [redacted]

[redacted] reports suggest that the Vietnamese suffered as many as 200 combat deaths per week, for a total of 4,000 during the 20-week wet season. Even if a number of wounded are added, the DK probably fell well short of their 50,000 goal.

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